Research Article

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Brand positioning of Kota Bharu as Islamic city

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Abstract

Over the last 30 years, place marketing has become an increasingly mutual strategy for entrepreneurial cities, regions and countries seeking to gain advantage in a competitive environment. Competition between places is global. Kota Bharu is the state capital of Kelantan, on the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia and was rebranded by the state government from a cultural city into an Islamic city since 2005. Hence, the urban design of the city is in the track of creating a city which could be related to an Islamic identity. City branding is one of the most frequent forms of place marketing that requires the local authorities to place a great emphasis on the physical renewal of the cities. A research on brand positioning is needed to explore the city transformation throughout the branding process. This conceptual paper aims to explore the concept traditional and modern Islamic city, to understand the overall Kota Bharu Islamic city built environment, and outline the brand positioning of Islamic city concept through observation to the built environment and content analysis method focusing on series of guidelines report published by MPKB-BRI. The paper's main objective is to highlight the city brand positioning by the local authority in building the city brand identity. The findings of Kota Bharu Islamic city brand positioning are explained through segmentation of three steps of city branding process in every five years initiated from the destination branding elements.

Keywords:

Brand identity, brand positioning, city branding, Islamic city, local government

1   Introduction

Place branding is the management of place image through strategic innovation and coordinated economic, commercial, social, cultural, and government policy. An early definition of "a brand is not only a symbol that separates one product from others, but it is all the attributes that come to the consumer's mind when he or she thinks about the brand. Such attributes are the tangible, intangible, psychological and sociological features related to the product", which makes the selection unique (Kapferer, 1997; Matlovičová, 2010).

Since 2005, the branding of Kota Bharu as an Islamic City has important implications to the development of the city in terms of physical development, built environment and changing economic and social environment to be more conducive and competitive with the values and philosophy of Islam. As some cities have a good image, some others have a negative or weak picture in the minds of people inside or outside the city (Gholipor, 2011; Yusof, Ismail, & Mohd Ghazali, 2014). Positive feedbacks and supports were shown by the public especially from visitors who observe the Islamic atmosphere in the city. Previous researchers had agreed that the built environment and landscape planning strategy and practice in the Kota Bharu Islamic City was well developed in order to confer Islamic images upon civic and state identities (Ahmad, Md.Hussain, Palil, & Dolah, 2013; Harun, Md Ali, & Zawawi, 2011; Mohd Isa, N., & Zen, 2011; Mohd Nasir & Salleh, 2014) and the Kota Bharu tagline and development plan had fulfilled the Islamic city concept, like been practised in traditional Islamic city (Mohd Yusof & Yaacob, 2013). Brand positioning is a core promise, a commitment by a city manager (CEOs for Cities, 2006), where activities performed to position the brand as what has been intended in the brand identity (Mohd Yusof & Ismail, 2015) as shown in Figure 1.1.
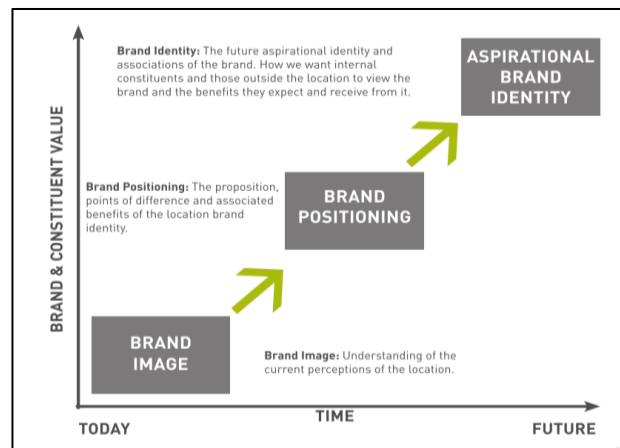
Source: CEOs for Cities (2006)

Figure 1: Brand positioning

Thus, an investigation into Kota Bharu Islamic City brand positioning by the city's local authority, Kota Bharu Islamic City Municipal Council (MPKB-BRI) is necessary to understand the process of Kota Bharu Islamic city brand positioning in achieving its aspirational brand identity as a new cultural urban tourism product in Malaysia.

2   Literature Review

2.1   Background of Kota Bharu- branding towards Islamic City

Kota Bharu is the state capital and has become the central point for Kelantan's administration and business activities with total population of 491,237 in 2010 and 95% of them are Malay ethnic (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2016). In 2016, Kelantan had attracted more than 5.8 million tourists (Kelantan Tourism Information Centre, 2017). Kota Bharu was declared Cultural City (Kota Budaya) in 1991 by its previous king, Sultan Ismail Petra ibni al-Marhum Sultan Yahya Petra. The formation of Kota Bharu as the cultural city was based on two main factors: Historical elements and Art and Cultural Heritage. Therefore, the declaration of Kota Bharu as a cultural city reflected its authenticity (Harun et al., 2011). As it is absolutely very rich in culture with vibrant markets and mosques and also various museums and former royal iconic buildings that uniquely contribute to the majestic landscape culture right in the heart of the city centre, Kota Bharu has become one of the top tourism cities in Malaysia due to its originality of Malay culture that has become an unusual environment in Malaysia towns.

However, after 15 years of being known as a "Cultural City", Kota Bharu was declared by the state government and the official declaration as an "Islamic City" in October 1st, 2005 and was announced by the same king. Thus, the landscape and urban design of the city is in the direction of creating a city which could be related to Islamic identity. As an Islamic City, it represents a symbolic icon in the urban development of the Islamic State of Kelantan, Malaysia. With the brand-new concept, it is aimed that if tourists would like to experience Islam in Malaysia, Kota Bharu is the right place to start due to the mostly appeared Islamic practices in the city- both physically and spiritually compared to other states in Malaysia. Moreover, if the tourists want to learn more about the religion of Islam, Islamic education system from early childhood until higher education were established and recognized internationally in this state, mostly located in Kota Bharu. It was stated that the rebranding process is a tourism strategy in order to promote Islamic tourism products in Kota Bharu (Mohd Yusof & Yaacob, 2013) like 'pondok', and proved the effectiveness of the strategy as a pull factor in drawing attention from people to see for themselves the transformation of the city (Ibrahim, Che Rahim, & Mohamed Nor, 2013). To understand the transformation of the city is by looking back at the original concept of Islamic city and how it was interpreted into the city through brand positioning by its local government- Kota Bharu Municipal Council.

2.2   Concept of Traditional Islamic City

Islam is seen by many scholars as an urban religion, which favours communal practice on individual worship, and it is widely accepted that most of Islamic teaching is best practiced in an urban setting (Saoud, 2002). In addition to the influence of local topography and morphological features of pre-existing towns, the Islamic city reflects the general socio-cultural, political, and economic structures of the newly created society According to Saoud (2002), in general this Islamic City concept involves the following features: (1) Natural laws- adaptation of the built form and plan of the city to natural circumstances expressed through weather conditions and topography; (2) Religious and cultural beliefs- formed the centre of cultural life for these populations, thus giving the mosque the central position in spatial and institutional hierarchies; (3) Design principles stemmed from Sharia law- the Islamic city also reflected the rules of Sharia (the Islamic Law) in terms of physical and social relations between public and private realms, and between neighbors and social groups; and (4) Social principles- The social organization of the urban society was based on social groupings sharing the same blood, ethnic origin and cultural perspectives. Development was therefore directed towards meeting these social needs, especially in terms of kinship solidarity, defense, social order and religious practices. Figure 2.1 shows the mosque as a centre of activity.
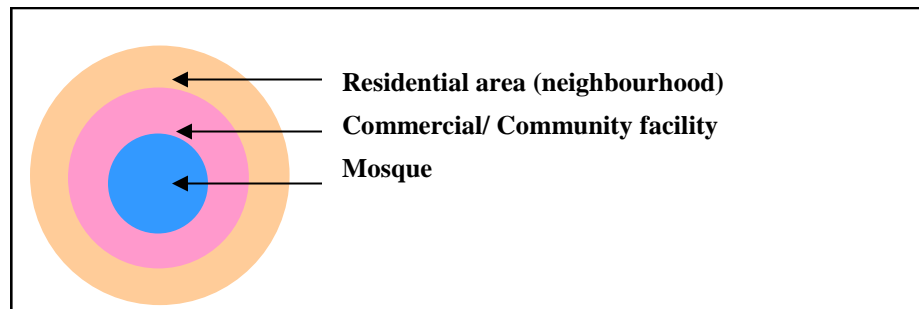
Source: MPKB-BRI (2008)

Figure 2: Concept of unity in Islamic city design principle

Scholars such as Eikelman (1981) and Hakim (1999) had seen the Islamic city as an entity with distinctive form and characteristics. The same debate has extended to the identifying features and characteristics and whether they are typical to be applied to all Islamic cities or unique to particular regions. This dilemma is widened further as many stereotypes for the typical Islamic city were produced reflecting the area and the city being studied. However, there is a general consensus (among scholars) that the Islamic city has some typical features as below (Saoud, 2002): (i) The main Mosque; (ii) Suqs; (iii) Citadel; (iv) Residential Quarters; (v) Street network; (vi) Wall; and (vii) Exterior. As part of understanding a city is reading its morphology; and since the form of a city is the direct reflection of the life-world of its people, it has to be studied within its own individual context, something which does not seem to have happened in the case of

Islamic cities. In texts on the morphology of Islamic cities, a series of attributions have been typically applied to the city's geometry, mainly based on the form of the street network, which has appeared to lack 'order' in comparison with European and Western cities. The major and usual points of departure for these descriptions were the cities' non-rectilinear paths, their large number of seeming cul-de-sac, and the feeling of getting lost within the city (Falahat, 2013). In a simple word, Islamic city concept is based on the Islamic theories and rules to formulate a city shape and deal with the unique, irreplaceable daily activities of people in the city from the Islamic perspective.

Islamic villages, towns and cities rarely conform to the geometric symmetry of urban planning who conceive their settlements as images of an ordered cosmos, with the mosque as central axis. Thus, traditional settlements tend to respect norms in Islamic religious principles as well as reflecting a social system that requires a balance between segregation in daily life, economic and religious life of a community. However, they face their contemporary problems of government, economics, and education as well as their environment and suggested that the ideas of Islamic environmental design are based on three main formative values (Mohd Nasir, 2015; Mohd Nasir & Salleh, 2014): (1) Environmental sensibility which is based on the natural topography, climate, garden and tools; (2) Morphological integrity, based on size and scale; and (3) Symbolic clarity, based on tradition, culture and identity. The urban morphology and figure-ground of estuary towns in in Malaysia have almost identical characteristics. Islamic influences were also discernible for example in the east coast states such as Kelantan and Terengganu which had accepted Islam since the 13th century. This Islamic influence can be clearly seen in the construction of mosques as important landmarks in the city centres that are used not only for prayers (solat) but also for religious study classes, dialogs on administrative matters (N. Z., Harun; RAJ, 2012) and community events.

2.3   Concept of Islamic City in Kota Bharu

Essentially, the urban design of the city is based on the state government slogan, developing with Islam in the direction of creating a city which could be related to an Islamic identity. The basis of the Kota Bharu Islamic City was to build an environment that consists of three major connections, namely; human with God, human with human, and human with nature (MPKB-BRI, 2002). The basis infused the city's development planning processes (development management, human development, economic development, and physical development) with desirable, relevant and applicable Islamic precepts. The city's development plan was divided into two phases, the first (2006-2010) which emphasised on a public awareness raising programme about the Islamic city's fivefold philosophy, and the second (2011-2015) which emphasised on the actual living up to the Islamic values of the city embodies (Saad & Radzi, 2015). In urban morphology aspect, Kota Bharu was grown and sustained with proper town planning principles according to Islamic township highlighted in Figure 2.2 and 2.3. Figure 2.2 shows the Old Town morphology where the Masjid Muhammadi mosque located right at the centre surrounded by various museums that were former royal iconic buildings and now known

as Cultural Heritage Zone. Figure 2.3 show the city expanded with developments of commercial and residential area to support the socio economy of the population.

Source: MPKB-BRI (2009)

Figure 3: Kota Bharu Old Town morphology

Source: Google Earth (2016)

Figure 4: Kota Bharu City Centre morphology

3   Methodology

This research is designed to explore the concept traditional and modern Islamic City, and to understand the Kota Bharu Islamic city built environment and brand positioning by the city's local authority, Kota Bharu Islamic City Municipal Council (MPKB-BRI). Thus,

observation and content analysis were used in this study, including official documents and relevant studies from journals, and the internet as sources of secondary data.

4   Findings

4.1   Kota Bharu Islamic City Brand Positioning

Generally, to make a correct decision and to schedule correctly, city managers need a comprehensive knowledge to influence the city and to create healthy communities and understand the costs and benefits of different patterns of development, i.e. they have to know the current image of the city, then to design the image as they wish and to define actions for city improvement. Studying of image and identity of the city is a crucial part of recognition in the process of urban planning strategy (Gholipoor et al., 2010, as cited by Nader Zali, Issa Ebrahimzadeh, Masoud Zamani-Poor, 2015). Kota Bharu as an Islamic City represents a symbolic icon in the urban development of the Islamic state of Kelantan. One of the most observable Islamic iconographies is the prevalence of Jawi script which is a modified form of Arabic script used for writing the Malay language in the names of streets, shops, signboards and billboards (Mohd Nasir & Salleh, 2014). For business premises, it is compulsory to put the Jawi script at their signboards in order to get the Business License approval from the MPKB-BRI License Department. Additionally, new buildings in the city centre must be decorated with the Arabesque pattern especially on the walls and facades, and have certain characteristics of Islamic architecture like Islamic dome, arch or attached the Islamic geometry wall panel, as a pre-condition of approval for Development Order (*Kebenaran Merancang*) from the MPKB-BRI Town Planning Department (MPKB-BRI, 2009). As a result, the image of the city as shown in Figure 4.1 has presented drastic changes in the last ten years, and created its own unique brand identity, a contrast to the former Kota Bharu.

Hence, to ensure the success of the Islamic mission, Kota Bharu Islamic City Municipal Council (MPKB-BRI) as the local authority is the most reliable institution responsible in implementing Islamic programs. In order to make sure that the objectives of the Islamic City is realized, MPKB-BRI has incorporated Islamic values and the traditional identity of the Kelantan Malay into its design principles in a few reports published from the early formed of Islamic City since 2005.Within 10 years of the formation process, four guidelines were published to guide the city planners and managers and also to give adequate information of the concept of Islamic city to the public as shown in Figure 4.2. The landscape master plan, however, was published in 2002, three years before the declaration (in 2005) as an early preparation to create the city scape and environment. It was suggested that some green and open spaces will be provided and the economic spaces in the city centre will be upgraded for the community prosperity and greater variety. The people were exhorted to respect the nature and environment to have a better understanding of God through "garden in heaven" landscape concept (Mohd Nasir, 2015; MPKB-BRI, 2002).

Source: MPKB-BRI (2017b)

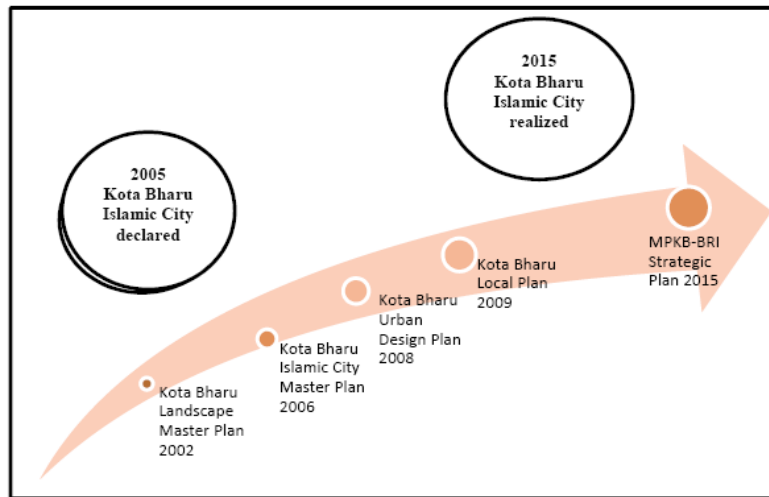Figure 5: Islamic city image highlighted in signage and architecture

Figure 6: Guidelines Published by MPKB-BRI during Kota Bharu Islamic City Formation Process

These reports mostly covered all aspects of planning in forming Islamic city features and characteristics- urban planning, urban design, landscape, tourism, and enhancing city image and vista. Initially started with Kota Bharu Landscape Master Plan in 2002, MPKB-BRI published the Kota Bharu Islamic City 2006-2015 Master Plan Report in 2006 after the declaration of Islamic City in 2005. Additionally, Kota Bharu Municipal Council had produced two more reports; Kota Bharu Urban Design Plan in 2008 followed by Kota Bharu Local Plan in 2009, ended with MPKB-BRI Strategic Plan 2016-2020 published in 2015 as a continuous effort in managing the aspirational Islamic city claimed to be achieved in 2015. These reports were acting as guidelines for the city managers especially town planners in order to plan and develop Kota Bharu city according to Islamic city philosophy. According to Mohd Yusof, (2011b) an Islamic City should be a catalyst for all parties involved in the branding process to provide the infrastructure and facilities that support urban tourism towards Islam. Instead, parties

involved directly with the branding campaign should consider in more detail the frame decent work, taking into account the community commitment, financial resources and so in order to realize the concept of Islamic City. Essentially, the urban design of the city is in the direction of creating a city which could be related to an Islamic identity. Therefore these reports acted as guidelines for the city managers especially town planners in order to plan, design and develop Kota Bharu according to Islamic City philosophy. The outcome from these guidelines should be reflected by Kota Bharu current built environment.

4.2   Kota Bharu Islamic City Built Environment

Since October 1st, 2005, Kota Bharu was declared by the Kelantan state government as an Islamic City thus the city is now practicing Islamic principles in every aspect of daily life. Essentially, the built environment of the city is based on the state government slogan, "Developing with Islam" in the direction of creating a city which could be related to an Islamic identity (Mohd Isa & Haji Zen, 2012; Mohd Nasir & Salleh, 2014). The concept and philosophy used in the implementation of Kota Bharu Islamic City are the faith (tawhid) and devotion of a city filled with the blessings of heaven and earth (MPKB-BRI, 2008) and fulfil the obligation as a Muslim like Allah says in Surah al-'A'raf, verse 96:

"If the people of a state is faithful and devoted we would be open to them blessings from the heaven and the earth. But if they lie, we will take action against them with what they earn. "

Appreciation of the concept of faith and devotion in the five main aspects of development was supposed to be able to reflect the fivefold philosophy of Kota Bharu Islamic City (5 Kaf (ک) in Jawi writing) known as: (1) Knowledge (Keilmuan); (2) Compliance (Kepatuhan); (3) Welfare (Kebajikan); (4) Hygiene (Kebersihan); and (5) Wellness (Kesejahteraan). These were the key objectives in the establishment of Kota Bharu Islamic City with its own identity in highlighting the values of Islam. These principles should infused the city's development planning processes with desirable, relevant and applicable Islamic precepts (Mohd Yusof, 2011a; MPKB-BRI, 2006; Saad & Radzi, 2015). Appreciation of the concept and philosophy of faith and obedience will be made to manifest in three main aspects of the development of the Islamic City, namely as follows; (1) Management development, namely the appreciation of faith and piety in the management and administration of the Council; (2) Human development, namely the appreciation of faith and piety in all structures of society, including faith, thought and behaviour or practice them; and (3) Physical development, the appreciation of faith and devotion in the development of Kota Bharu built environment so as to ensure the sustainability of the natural environment for the sake of the city future generation.

The Kota Bharu Islamic city physical development plan could be divided into two stages after the declaration in 2005: the first stage (2006-2010) which emphasised on a public awareness raising programme about the Islamic city concept and its fivefold philosophy mentioned above- Knowledge, Compliance, Welfare, Hygiene and Wellness, and the second stage (2011-2015) which emphasised on physical development as the

actual living up to the Islamic values the city embodies such as traffic management, diversification of public amenities and provide facilities for tourism activities (Mat Akhir, 2010; Muhibudin, Mohamed, & Abooali, 2010; Saad & Radzi, 2015). An aspirational brand identity and its associated positioning normally have a three-year horizon. However, with destination branding the time horizon can be considerably longer, assuming three to five years to see the result (CEOs for Cities, 2006). Following Aaker's (1996) branding concept, Pike (2012) claimed that destination branding process has three important core constructs which are brand identity, brand positioning and brand image (Mohd Yusof & Ismail, 2015; Pike, 2012) as depicted in Figure 4.3 below:
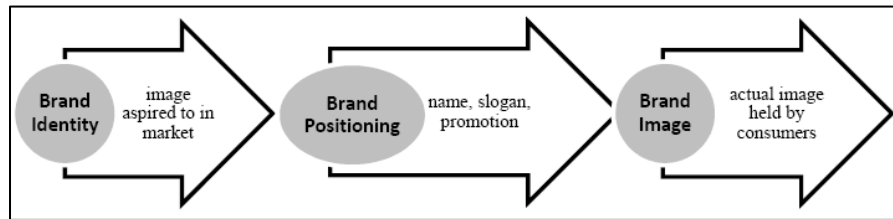
Source: Pike (2012)

Figure 4.3: Destination branding elements

As Kota Bharu is supposed to achieve its mission as an Islamic city in 2015, therefore the researcher decided to add another step after the planning stage and implementation stage named the evaluation stage as the third stage (2010-2015). The third stage will evaluate the current "brand image" after the "brand positioning" process, whether it has achieved the aspirational "brand identity" as shown in Figure 4.4. Kota Bharu Islamic city "PIE" branding process are defined: 'P' stand for Planning, 'I' stands for Implementation while 'E' stands for Evaluation stage. Every stage took duration around five years, an optimum period to see the result as suggested above. Hence, it is suggested an evaluation study needs to be done to see the final result of the whole branding process, as it supposed to accomplish the brand identity in 2015.
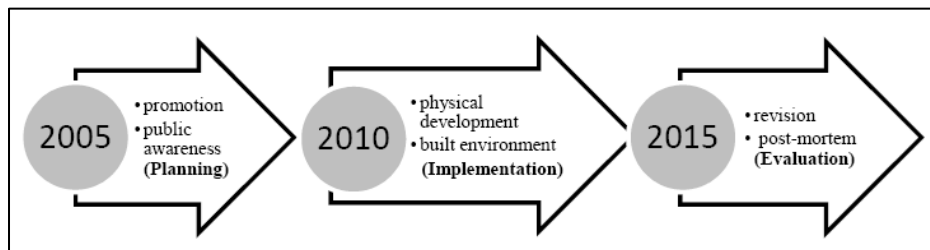

Figure 4.4: Kota Bharu Islamic city "PIE" branding process

5 Conclusion

Branding Kota Bharu as an Islamic city is a brilliant strategy to introduce Islamic tourism products that would appeal to tourists especially Muslims to travel and at the same time enjoy the activities that apply to the concept of Islam. It also has important implications for the development of the local community in terms of image and changing economic and social environment to be more conducive and competitive with the values and philosophy of Islam. According to Mohd Yusof (2011a), an Islamic city should be a catalyst for all parties involved in the branding process to provide the infrastructure and facilities that support urban tourism towards Islam. It is learned developing a brand strategy for a community should not be the task of a single organization and must include a variety of stakeholders in assuring that multiple perspectives and issues are considered and make buy-in and execution less complicated (CEOs for Cities, 2006). Moreover, parties involved directly with the branding campaign should heavily consider the frame decent work, taking into account the community commitment, financial resources and so in order to realize the concept of Islamic City. In order to establish a strong destination branding, understanding the process of image perception by the demand-side and projection by the supply-side is crucial in positioning the destination and competitiveness (Cai, 2002; Lin, Pearson, & Cai, 2010; Mak, 2011), cited in Mohd Yusof & Ismail, 2015. The evaluation stage added at the third stage of the brand positioning is essential to evaluate the current "brand image" whether it has achieved the aspirational "brand identity". Therefore, there is an urgent need for a research to evaluate whether brand image in the perspectives of people are congruent with the brand identity created by MPKB-BRI after all the brand positioning were done. This study is expected to contribute a holistic approach in understanding the city branding process in Kota Bharu Islamic city. The next step is crucial to measure the effectiveness of the brand positioning, and whether the aspirational brand identity is achieved by the city.

6 About the Authors

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